

〈Research Note〉

Expanding Hands-on Learning Opportunities in the Course of Teacher Training

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Introduction

The present circumstances surrounding students who aspire to becoming a teacher is extremely severe. For example, due to fewer children, the number of recruited teachers is on the decline and the rate of recruiting certified teachers is thus falling. Though it may be widening recently, it cannot be denied that the chance of becoming a teacher is still a “narrow gate”.

In addition to the high hurdle at the entrance, there are numerous difficult problems in the actual classrooms or schools themselves. As represented by the expression, “classroom breakdown”, situations in which it is difficult to offer a proper education are reported day and night and are becoming problems of growing public concern. It is no exaggeration to say that teachers’ daily struggles with children who have all sorts of problems are so removed from the actual “teacher’s vocation” which students imagine and aspire to. Even if they graduate from school with honors and pass a difficult teacher’s license examination, a considerable number of young teachers lose their confidence in their qualifications as a teacher, become exhausted mentally and physically and suffer setbacks in less than six months after recruitment.

Required curriculums necessary for a teacher’s acquisition of knowledge and expertise can be divided into the following three categories¹⁾ (1) teaching theoretical knowledge, etc. (groups of subjects concerning the value of a subject as well as basic theory), (2) integration of theories and practices (groups of subjects concerning course instruction, student guidance, etc.) and (3) teaching practical skills, etc.

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1) The Educational Personnel Training Council: *The Expert Committee Report on Teaching Practice*, 1978

(providing opportunities where educational theories and practices can function interactively). Especially, (3) teaching practical skills, etc. is considered to be essential in building up qualities as well as abilities that correspond to various difficulties in today's educational work front as it offers an opportunity for students to acquire applicable and practical skills. To be specific, a training period in the form of "teaching practice" is one example and a four-week-long teaching practice session is usually conducted in the educational work front.

However, providing such an intensive and formal teaching practice alone is not sufficient for students to acquire the creative attitude to enable them to face up to and then overcome unexpected difficulties in the actual workplace. Therefore, in the teacher-training curriculum, "to expand hands-on learning opportunities" is a significant and important challenge. Its importance has often been cited but as yet no system for offering such opportunities has been realized. Amidst the present situations where our students are sent out into classrooms one after another, we do not have the time to just sit around waiting for the establishment of such a system.

This research paper reports on the extracurricular activities conducted by a group of students whose core members belong to my seminar in order to expand hands-on learning opportunities by getting involved in children or school education scenes.

1. Teacher Training and Hands-on Learning

Initiatives where university students visit schools to conduct exchanges with schoolchildren are becoming increasingly common. Activities vary from a student-led volunteer activity with the support of individual schools to a formal collaborative initiative between boards of education and universities.

The object lesson-centered concept is not really a new idea and actually some teacher training departments of national universities offer selective object lessons as a part of the freshman's curriculum. However, Japan has adopted a so-called "open system" in which one can obtain a teaching certificate by taking a teacher-training course in addition to the specialized subjects of the department concerned rather than in the teacher training departments of national universities. In such cases, many students often just acquire the minimum number of credits required to obtain a teaching certificate.

The Department of Education of Bukkyo University is not what we call a

teacher training department but it allows students to acquire a teaching certificate based on the open system. However, in reality, students who aim to become a teacher make up the majority and a number of graduates are engaged in teaching. Our curriculum is constructed in a way that students can acquire the knowledge or skills necessary for teaching and can enhance their qualities. We aim to turn out future teachers who compare favorably with those who are from teacher-training departments of national universities and actually our graduates are already highly esteemed in the work front.

However, because our department is not systematically specialized for teacher training, students have to take far more credits than those required for graduation and as a result they have to spend an extra number of hours in class. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to introduce a 'hands-on' lesson at an earlier stage and to obtain opportunities for such learning as a part of either curricular or extracurricular activities.

As an advisory organ for the Minister of Education (currently the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), the Educational Personnel Training Council urges, in its initial report submitted in 1997, "Concerning Improved Measures for Teacher Training toward a New Era", universities to actively plan and carry out an extra teaching practice session which exceeds the required number of credit hours for acquiring a license (five credits for elementary school teaching).²⁾

The report gives specific examples presented in recent years as part of the teacher-training courses including providing opportunities where students are able to communicate with children on Saturday, a school holiday, conducting training camps or exchange programs with schoolchildren in a joint effort among schools, boards of education and universities and attempts in which teacher applicants provide weekly assistance in class, etc. with the cooperation of boards of education. Furthermore, as for such extra teaching practice which exceeds the required credits, each university, at its own discretion, can decide to include a wide variety of work-studies in welfare, volunteer, or nature-based experiences in addition to the above children-targeted programs and is expected to exert its imaginative originality and ingenuity.

In our university, too, a number of students are involved in activities with chil-

2) The initial report of the Educational Personnel Training Council, II Improvement of Teacher-training Curriculum, 2 Improvement of the Quality of Education in a Teacher-training Course, 1997

dren. In that sense, there are quite a few extracurricular hands-on learning opportunities. But, at the same time, it is true that quality-wise each activity differs greatly. That's why we decided to initiate an endeavor providing hands-on learning opportunities that help students obtain the necessary attitude or ability to enable them to overcome various difficult situations that they can expect to face as a teacher in the future.

2. Efforts in Hands-on Learning Opportunities

(1) International volunteer activities in education

In September, 1999, nine students whose core members are my fourth-grade seminar students went to one of the poorer villages in the suburb of Dun Huang, China, and engaged themselves in volunteer activities at one elementary school in Xindian tai village. A Japanese-style painter, Mr. HIRAYAMA Ikuo, came to our university to give a lecture and told us that he was building an elementary school from his own funds for children who live in a remote rural area in China and are not able to receive a proper education. This was how everything started.

Students thought: "We do not have any status or honor, let alone financial power. But, as young people who aim at becoming teachers, we must be able to visit this elementary school which Mr. HIRAYAMA Ikuo set up and have an educational exchange." It appears that there was an exotic yearning for an unknown world such as a remote country district of China in their thoughts. Every one of them had experienced a variety of studies and hands-on experiences in the pursuit of becoming a teacher. On the other hand, they all had a sense of uncertainty or hesitation about becoming one.

"Am I really gifted as a teacher? Do I really have the requisite qualities for a teacher?" "Will what I have learned or experienced so far be really useful in classrooms?" With such questions or uncertainties remaining in their mind and being about to graduate, it seems that they were determined to face such a challenge.

For those who started making a plan in April right after they became a fourth grade student, a preparation period of only about four months remained. Moreover, the teachers' license examination was approaching and they were also required to proceed with a graduation thesis at the same time. In other words, they had matters of great importance to face, none of which could be neglected. Nevertheless, they went ahead to take on this big challenge.

This was going to be an activity in a faraway country. Their preparation be-

gan by imagining what kinds of children there are and what their living is like. They made inquiries in various areas or collected information with the cooperation of Japan-China Friendship Association. Then, they began to make a four-day-teaching plan at The Xindian tai elementary school.

Their task was not easy because they had to consider not only what they would like to try but also what the children would want to learn. Students made plans by making full use of resources, information and their imagination. In the beginning, they were pursuing a plan solely driven by their ideas and thoughts, without considering anything else. However, in the course of making a plan, they started wondering: "How will the children respond?" "Will they be pleased?" "Will it be possible to communicate what we want to convey?" Students then tried hard to mirror the expressions or responses of children whom they were yet to meet in their minds.

As the departure for China was approaching, more specific information about the local situation gradually became evident, which pressed the students to review their plans. Parallel with their "now advancing and now retreating" preparations, the students were busy procuring materials for making Japanese kites, a core activity of their project, and the musical instruments necessary for music activities. In order to smoothly implement their activities there, the students spent huge amount of time in preparing materials, etc.

At first, student were discussing in a harmonious atmosphere, showing concern for each other. However, students who began to have strong aspirations for making a success of the project came to have earnest discussions, exchanging candid opinions and sometimes blowing off steam or shedding bitter tears. What concerned them the most in making some decisions and choices was whether or not the children would be interested in what they had to offer.

By overcoming countless difficult situations, each one of them continued to grow. They had found something worthwhile that required them to use their potential to the full. This realization of their potential was a self-realization in itself. They had become a person who strives toward "Self Acturizatio"³⁾ as Maslow (Maslow, A.H) said.

Looking back, one of the students said: "I was not sure if I was qualified to be a teacher, but now I understand that, for a teacher, to believe in one's own possibilities is as important as to believe in the children's possibilities".

3) Maslow. A.H: *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Viking Press, 1971

Three of the students who participated in this project successfully passed the teachers' license examination in the same year as their graduation. In the following year, three more students passed the examination as did one additional student this spring. The remaining two have been working as a temporary lecturer after their graduation. They are all highly evaluated in classrooms and schools.

Having such an opportunity that is rarely experienced in daily life helped them to grow remarkably. Therefore, it may be considered that this was an exceptional case. However, what's happening in classrooms today is the very same non-everyday world. A unique and unusual experience that one is never able to learn in an ordinary student's life is indeed essential for students who aim to becoming a teacher today.

A documentary program on the student's educational volunteer activities in Dun Huang, China, was broadcasted on TV. Also, through my publications?, their activities became well known among many students who aim to becoming a teacher. Those students who thought they would like to experience similar activities followed up and took over this volunteer activity in China. Beside this, students also worked on a project for the Taiwan Earthquake relief aid as well as on educational exchange (TAP Taiwan Aid Project) in 2000 and 2001, for two years in a row.

The first "TAP 2000" was initiated in response to the remark of a foreign student from Taiwan that they want to go back to their earthquake-stricken motherland to work as a volunteer. Colleagues who heard this said, "Let us work on this together"

Everything was a new experience and students were full of anxiety when they started. But, they were able to achieve their goal without any major problems thanks to their friendship with local volunteers of the same generation and with the support of volunteer staff members coming from Japan, etc. "We were supposed to help them, but actually it was us who were helped..." This was how they truly felt. Above all, they learned the importance of responsible behavior and of thinking of others more than oneself.

The second "TAP 2001" started with the feelings that "We don't want just to follow what our predecessors already accomplished". The first TAP had another goal that was to deliver encouraging messages from Japanese children. Many elementary school children collaborated in this project. Especially, with the children of the elementary school where their senior is working as a teacher, this TAP had formed the base for their exchange.

As a result of thinking about how they would build a new relationship with those children while they continue this exchange, "Can't we act as an intermediary between these Japanese schoolchildren and Taiwanese schoolchildren for their exchanges?" a project started with game oriented exchanges as a new theme.

I was in charge of the first party. But this time, neither I, nor any Taiwanese foreign students, accompanied the second party. Students themselves took the sole responsibility for their activities but fortunately there was the cooperation of a local volunteer staff with whom students had been communicating since the previous year. Students visited facilities for the aged earthquake victims and stayed over in the same room with the old people who received Japanese education under Japanese rule. Such experiences made a deep impression on the students and led to a significant personal discovery.

Later, when Mt. Usu erupted or the Geiyo Earthquake occurred in Japan, young people in Taiwan came to work as a volunteer to return the favor. It thus evolved into volunteer exchanges. When those young people visited Kyoto from Taiwan, Japanese students provided them with their rooms for lodging and took them around and such interactive exchanges between the youth of the two countries through volunteer activities developed into a friendship regardless of region or culture. Such exchanges still continue today.

After returning to Japan, a youth whom our students had got to know in Taiwan sent a letter to the project members, saying: "I have been conscripted into the military. I hate it. I really hope that peace will be soon realized around the world."

Every one of the members was shocked. Around that time, due to the simultaneous terrorist attacks that occurred in the United States, a war in the Arab area was expected to break out anytime.

"Having grown up in Japan, I had never thought that I would shed tears over a friend who is going to be drafted..."

Every one of them felt for the first time that they could not be indifferent to the war or the army. It was not a happy occasion but it was the moment when they experienced the world firsthand. Some people say, "You can work as a volunteer or do educational exchanges here in Japan. Why bother going abroad?" However, cultural or educational exchanges overseas definitely give the youth really precious experiences. Witnessing such activities and the development of their seniors, the third Taiwan Project is currently in progress.

(2) Exchanges with schoolchildren

Presently, students in my seminar continue to be involved in exchanges with the fifth and sixth grades pupils of Kyoto City U Elementary School. One of my seminar graduates offered some help to U School where another of our graduates works and that's how the exchange started. Since then, using a period of integrated learning, students have been giving lessons on the big earthquake in Taiwan or volunteer activities, etc. Major activities so far are as follows.

- ① Exchange through video mails or E-mails with schoolchildren
- ② Students' participation in integrated learning classes on education for global understanding or information education.
- ③ Participation in class as an assistant for information technology device operation.
- ④ Involvement in community volunteer activities together with schoolchildren.
- ⑤ Cooperation or participation as a volunteer in various school events including athletic meetings.
- ⑥ Schoolchildren's visiting the University and attending classes as a one-day university student.

Schoolchildren can learn a lot from students' volunteer spirits and at the same time the university students can learn considerably from being in classrooms or from pupils by participating in educational activities on a daily basis. Especially, with many regional problems, U Elementary School, located in the middle of the busy downtown streets where areas facing discrimination still exist, has been working on human right issues from early on. Our students are able to learn something that they could never learn if they were only taking university classes.

3. Challenges and Perspectives in Expanding Hands-on Learning Opportunities

This "experiment for expanding hands-on learning" did not necessarily have a clear purpose right from the beginning. Originally, it was an experiment for improving a lesson aiming to increase the third and fourth year students' commitments in seminar classes. As I mentioned before, many of the students who aim to become a teacher nurture dreams or hopes of engaging in teaching. To them, the teaching profession is a longed-for vocation. Their volition is firm and strong, but at the same time the act of obtaining a teacher's license as a qualification and

passing the teacher's license examination tend to be emphasized and to be made the purpose of their studies.

It seems that students are not really able to feel that they themselves are going to face up to such situations even though they are exposed to frequent news reports about today's situations in which it is difficult to offer education. Many of them do face up to difficult situations in the real world as well as the gap between their long-cherished dreams and the reality only after they graduate. That is why they start to question their qualities, lose confidence and finally lose the value and meaning of continuing to be a teacher.

In the students' course of learning, an attitude to study something as a means for some other purpose such as graduation, higher education or employment may be observed. On the other hand, as is shown in the following comment "I want to achieve to reach my satisfaction by any means." there is also an attitude in which the act itself appears to be a goal. Regarding such a difference in attitudes, Maslow (Maslow, A.H.) named the former 'coping behavior', the latter 'expressive behavior' and then defined that to realize one's values by the latter is self-actualization.?

Considering the difficulties in classrooms or schools, it is necessary to see a teacher-training course as not only for conveying expertise or skills but also as a process toward self-actualization. That is, the important thing is to let students overcome their 'coping behavior' first and then to lead them to acquire 'expressive behavior'.

However, many students, especially those who are in the first or second grade, have a strong longing to become a teacher but still retain their 'coping behavior'. They haven't received a sufficient specialized education in teaching yet.

The reason why the fourth-year students are involved in this hands-on learning experiment is that they are supposed to have experiences in practicing teaching when they are third-year students. Furthermore, the fourth year students have reached a stage where they can make the most of their experiences in after-school care for children, volunteer activities at institutions for disabled children or extracurricular educational activity groups. They can also confirm their knowledge or skills that they have acquired in specialized subjects or the teacher-training course by trying them out in classrooms.

It is also clear from previous experiences that not everybody will grow even if given the opportunity of hands-on learning. Some students who seem to be participating as a "guest observing an event" are also found among the project partici-

pants.

Unless each one of them has a keen awareness of the problem and takes an initiative in the project, benefits from their participation cannot be expected.

In order to allow hands-on learning to display its true potential, it is essential to cultivate the level of participating students to the point where they are satisfactorily well prepared. To do that, it is necessary to systematically program hands-on learning according to the reality of each grade level and its accompanying learning as part of the curriculum. Our university is scheduled to make an extensive reform of the curriculum in 2004. On this occasion, a program should be prepared to nurture the knowledge, skills and attitude essential for getting involved in the educational work front while at the same time trying to expand hands-on learning opportunities in the curriculum.

Conclusion

Aiming at "improving the qualities of a teacher" in teacher education means that the question "What qualities make a good teacher?" must be clarified at the same time. Of course, an ideal set of answers are always offered. However, they are all stereotyped set phrases that will no longer work in the real classroom. "I like children" or "longing for a teaching position" might be a starting point but taken alone are not enough to have the professional qualities of a teacher.

Answers to the question "What qualities make a good teacher?" presented by students as a result of their activities are: creativity, including a rich imagination and ability of expression, to be able to trust their own possibilities as well as the children's possibilities all the way, and above all, to have a personality which enables a person to continue evolving.

In order to nurture such a personality, a teacher-training curriculum must be developed as a process for self-actualization. To achieve this, steps to expand hands-on learning opportunities must be pressed forward with, free from the conventional framework of practice teaching.

4) OHASHI Isao: *Kyoshi wo Mezasu Wakamono-tachi (Young People Aiming to Becoming a Teacher)*, President, 2000

5) Maslow. A.H: *Motivation & Personality*, Harper & Row, 1954